11-1-2004

The Use of History in the Movement for the Civic Engagement of Higher Education

Gary Daynes
Brigham Young University

The Use of History in the Movement for the Civic Engagement of Higher Education

Dr. Gary Daynes, Associate Director, Freshman Academy and Adjunct Assistant Professor of History, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

No other effort to reform American higher education is as attentive to the past as the civic engagement movement. The historical minded-ness of the movement is one of its strengths. Its explicit connection to the historical mission of American higher education makes it broadly appealing, and its base in John Dewey's progressive theories of education give it an intellectual heft missing in other reform movements. But the civic engagement movement's use of history is not always well-considered. As a result, the movement has not taken full advantage of the historical profession's insights into civic engagement. Nor has it adopted the historical practices that can deepen civic engagement efforts and the partnerships that underlie them. In particular, the movement would be well-served by paying more attention to the historical analogies it uses and examining more closely the contexts out of which successful models of civic engagement grow.

Of the four major reform movements currently afoot in American higher education--the use of computer technology to deliver content, the drive for outcomes-based assessment, the shift to learning instead of teaching as the classroom goal, and the movement for civically engaged education--three either ignore or are explicitly critical of historic educational practices. The use of computer technology in teaching, and outcomes-based assessment are both examples of developments born outside education being applied to the field. As such they are more attuned to the thirst for innovation and markets that drive the American economy than they are to the history of American education. The learning movement, based in innovations in cognitive science, does acknowledge the history of education, but it does so largely to criticize its assumption that a well-reasoned lecture would lead automatically to student learning (Cuban, 1993; Ewell, 1997; Leamnson, 1999).

In contrast to the a- or anti-historical bent of other major reform movements, the movement for civic engagement in higher education is favorably disposed to history, so much so that it sometimes seems that the goal of this movement is to restore an earlier version of higher education. Take, for instance, the civic engagement movement's regular evocation of the historic mission of American colleges and universities. Movement supporters regularly note that most varieties of American higher education were born with a civic purpose (Donovan, 2000; Saltmarsh, 2000). Harvard University, the first institution of higher education, was established to train ministers who would then form the spiritual and civic centers of Puritan villages in New England. On the heels of Harvard came hundreds of faith-based institutions, nearly all of which had a civic religious, not a monastic, purpose. Early public institutions, like the University of Virginia, likewise bore the obligation to serve citizens by training them in their public duties (Jefferson, 1990). This civic obligation was later codified in the mission of the land-grant universities through the Morrill Act of 1862 (Christy, 1992).

After the Civil War, the secular private institutions, like Stanford and the University of Chicago, that sprang from the wealth of American industrialists, pledged themselves to the civic well-being of their surrounding communities (Benson and Harkavy, 2000; Harkavy, 1996), while historically Black colleges and universities made the same pledge to the race they serve (Jones, 2000). More recently, community colleges have offered the civic and economic benefits of higher education to all Americans.

Of course the civic mission of higher education has not translated into an engaged, educated citizenry. There are many reasons that this is the case, most of which fall outside the control of higher education. But one does--the fact that while institutions of higher education have ostensibly civic purposes, they do their work in an undemocratic fashion. The civic engagement movement has made this point most forcibly about pedagogy (though it is now turning its attention, with some success, to the question of governance), and has proposed, as a basis for a democratic pedagogy, service-learning and other forms of teaching that emerge from the progressive-era educational theory of John Dewey (Giles, 1991; Giles and Eyler, 1994; Saltmarsh, 1996). Dewey's work is far too vast to survey here, but it suffices to say that nearly all of the components of service-learning--experience as the basis of learning, connections with community life, reflection, and the desirability of democratic as well as content-based learning outcomes--can be found in Dewey. The movement for civic engagement is not just intent, then, on restoring the historic mission of higher education; it aims to do so through an historic theory and pedagogy.

As a historian I have mixed feelings about this movement's embrace of the American past. It is gratifying to see colleagues take the past so seriously, and to connect it to a movement for the democratic renewal of American society. And given the tendency of educational reformers to ignore the past (often at the cost of repeating its errors), this movement's explicit connection to the past can help it avoid mistakes that have swallowed other reform movements. But to escape those mistakes the movement needs to more carefully consider the appropriateness of the historical analogies it draws and acknowledge the role that context plays in understanding the past.

When most people use history they use it as a source of analogies to help guide their decisions in the present (Neustadt and May, 1986; Rosenzweig and Thelan, 1998). A politician worrying that the next war will be "another Vietnam," or that the dictator of the moment is "another Hitler" is using a historical analogy. Historical analogies are valuable things--they can evoke emotion, raise alternative perspectives, rally support, and deepen discussion. But historical analogies are always imprecise. There will never be "another Vietnam" (even if the United States goes to war in Vietnam again) and no dictator, however brutal or megalomaniacal, will be "another Hitler." The present is not the past; it is, at most, similar. Because the past and the present are not the same, people who would use historical analogies as the basis for present behavior need to consider both the conditions in the past that created a particular historical situation and how those conditions have changed

since.

The movement for the civic engagement of higher education has, at its core, an informal historical analogy that goes like this: in the past most varieties of higher education fulfilled civic purposes and the public (at least by many measures) was more civically engaged. Today the American public and American higher education are less civically engaged. Therefore, higher education should return to its civic roots, and by so doing, improve the civic engagement of the public. For all of the appeal of this analogy, it has two major flaws.

The first is assuming that because certain types of institutions of higher education once had civic missions, they can and should continue to have the same civic missions. The cases of both land-grant and faith-based institutions suggest the difficulty of maintaining a particular civic mission over time. Land-grant schools were founded with the goal of spreading scientific research to the agricultural and (sometimes) mechanical sections of society. That mission was a good fit for a nation with a predominantly agricultural economy and a population rapidly settling remote portions of the continent. Since then, though, the portion of the population engaged in farming has declined precipitously, while access to the resources of cities has increased. At the same time, land-grant schools have taken on the trappings of the modern research university (Hightower, 1973). Land-grant institutions may desire a return to their historic missions, but their form of organization and the priorities of their faculty will certainly impede that effort. And should they manage to re-emerge from their isolation, the audience that awaits them will bear little resemblance to the farmers and mechanics they once served. The same is true of faith-based institutions. Once, most private institutions of higher education were affiliated with protestant denominations. Those institutions aimed to educate Christian men and women, many of whom were bent on evangelizing the rest of the world. Starting in the late 19th century, though, those affiliations began to disintegrate, for both intellectual and religious reasons. Faculty, administrators, and students became increasingly skeptical of the 'truth claims' of religious denominations, and embraced tolerance, not evangelism as the goal of their educational institutions. This is not to say that all religious schools have abandoned the theological basis for their community-based work. After all, most Jesuit and many conservative Christian schools maintain religious reasons for supporting civic engagement. But it is to say that a certain important style of civic engagement, that of civic Protestantism, is largely unavailable today (Marsden, 1994).

The second flaw in the historical analogies underlying civically engaged education is the assumption that the decline in civic engagement is in some way related to the decline of the civic mission of higher education. While those two declines happened at roughly the same time, it is difficult to show that they are causally related. Histories of civic engagement have argued that suburbanization, television, the internet, the coarsening of our political system, the expansion of the workforce to include a majority of adult women, and the decline of major voluntary associations all have contributed

to the decline of civic life in the US (Putnam, 2000; Schudson, 1999). There is little evidence that changes, for good or ill, in the civic engagement of higher education have had a major influence on the civic engagement of Americans.

Supporters of the civic engagement of higher education should take the same care with their allusions to Dewey that I have suggested they take with their historical analogies. Dewey's work, and that of progressive education in general, arose in a particular educational and political context. Some aspects of the educational context, such as the extension of higher education opportunities to middle-class women, the increase in number and type of colleges and universities, and, in Dewey, the explicit connection between education and democratic civic life, supported civic engagement. Others, such as the professionalization of the disciplines, and the adoption of the German model of research universities, have since led to the obscure language, quest for expert knowledge, and insular research that impede the civic engagement of higher education today (Boyte, 2000; Lasch, 1995; Novick, 1988; Ravitch, 2000) . The political context of progressive higher education has a similarly mixed legacy. Progressive-era intellectuals led a successful attack on corrupt political machines and corporate excess; they won widespread acceptance of initiatives and referenda, and women's suffrage, which have extended the political influence of citizens. But the progressives were also foes of the political parties and friends of putting more and more government decisions in the hands of university-trained experts (Hadley, 1927; Schudson, 2000). Before the era of progressive dominance, over 80% of the populace voted. Since the progressive era voter turnout has rarely risen above 60%. Progressives can be said to have opened the political system to the possibility of democratic involvement while simultaneously limiting the actual engagement of citizens.

This brief survey of progressive-era education makes clear, I hope, that Dewey's work comes out of a complicated context, and that a simple application of Dewey's theories to today's classrooms carries with it no guarantee of civic engagement. It should suggest as well that certain historical skills are essential to any civic engagement effort, whether or not that effort is explicitly about history. The Bush Administration and Congress have come to this conclusion in their recent emphasis on history as the tool that connects civics and service (Bush, 2002; House Concurrent Resolution 451, 2002; NARA, 2002). But their use of history rests on an unexamined analogy as well, one that assumes that the civic component of America's founding documents is easily related to contemporary American service.

Looking to the past for models of civic engagement is a valuable first step towards actual civic engagement. But practitioners must do more than find historical models. We need to examine the history of the issues they aim to address, and the contexts out of which their theories, models, and practices emerge. Homelessness in New York City does not have the same causes or effects as homelessness in Beaver, Utah. Racism today is not the same as racism in 1963. If we are to respond to the issues we face today, we must ask and answer serious historical questions as part of our work. We must know

how things got to be the way they are where we are. We must understand how the residue of past events will impede or speed along our partnerships. We must uncover the historical contexts of the programs we adopt. We must ask how those contexts will fit the contexts we work in. It is only when those questions are answered that we can bring to bear the historical analogies and methods that give the movement for civic engagement its energy and appeal.

About the Author

Dr. Gary Daynes is Associate Director of Freshman Academy and Adjunct Assistant Professor of History at Brigham Young University. Formerly, he was Director of Service-Learning for the Washington Campus Compact. Before joining the Compact he was an Assistant Professor of History at Brigham Young University and Executive Director of the Utah Campus Compact. He is the author of Making Villains, Making Heroes: Joseph R. McCarthy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Politics of American Memory and several articles on the use of history in building communities. His recent documentary The Best Crop, an examination of the decline of agriculture in Utah, grew out of a three-year long service-learning project.

References

Benson, Lee and Harkavy, Ira. (2000) "Higher Education's Third Revolution: The Emergence of the Democratic Cosmopolitan Civic University." *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research* 5 (1): 47-57.

Boyte, Harry C. (2000) "The Struggle against Positivism." *Academe,* July-August, 46-51.

Bush, George W. (2002) President Introduces History and Civic Education Initiatives.
http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020917-1.html
Christy, Ralph D. (1992) *A Century of Service: Land-grant Colleges and Universities, 1890-1990.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Cuban, Larry. (1993) *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890-1980.* New York: Longman.

Donovan, Bill M. (2000) Service-Learning as a Strategy for Advancing the Contemporary University and the Discipline of History. In I. Harkavy and B. Donovan, eds. *Connecting Past and Present: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in History* (pp.11-27). Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.

Ewell, Peter. (1997) "Organizing for Learning." *AAHE Bulletin,* December 1997, 3-6.

Giles, Dwight. (1991) "Dewey's Theory of Experience: Implications

for Service-Learning." *Journal of Cooperative Education* 27(2), 87-90.

Giles, Dwight and Eyler, Janet. (1994) "Theoretical Roots of Service-Learning in John Dewey: Toward a Theory of Service-Learning." *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning* (1), 77-85.

Hadley, Arthur Twining. (1927) *Undercurrents in American Politics.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Harkavy, Ira. (1996) "Back to the Future: From Service-Learning to Strategic Academically-Based Community Service." *Metropolitan Universities* 7(1), 57-70.

Hightower, Jim. (1973) *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times: The Failure of the Land-Grant College Complex.* Cambridge, MA: Schenkman

House Concurrent Resolution 451. (2002) Recognizing the Importance of Teaching United States History and Civics In Elementary and Secondary Schools. Washington, DC: GPO.

Jefferson, Thomas. (1990) "Report of the Commissioners of the University of Virginia (1818)." In T. Jefferson, *Public and Private Papers* (pp. 131-147). New York: Vintage Books, Library of America Edition.

Jones, Beverly W. (2000) "Reclaiming the Historical Tradition of Service in the African-American Community." In I. Harkavy and B. Donovan, Eds. *Connecting Past and Present: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in History* (pp. 139-147). Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.

Lasch, Christopher. (1995) *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy.* New York: Norton.

Leamnson, Robert. (1999) *Thinking about Teaching And Learning: Developing Habits of Learning with First Year College and University Students.* Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Marsden, George. (1994) *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief.* New York: Oxford University Press.

NARA (2002). White House Announces Initiatives on Teaching American History and Civics. http://www.archives.gov/media_desk/press_releases/nr02-78.html

Neustadt, Richard and May, Ernest. (1986) *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers.* New York: Free Press.

Ravitch, Diane. (2000) *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Rosenzweig, Roy and Thelan, David. (1998) *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Saltmarsh, John. (1996) Education for Critical Citizenship: John Dewey's Contribution to the Pedagogy of Community Service-Learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning* (3), 13-21.

Saltmarsh, John. (2000) Emerson's Prophecy. In I. Harkavy and B. Donovan, eds. *Connecting Past and Present: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in History* (pp. 43-60). Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.

Schudson, Michael. (1999) *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Return to Journal